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PENNSYLVANIA TRAIL OF HISTORY

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Pennsylvania Historical and
Museum Commission.
Drake Well Park

DRAKE WELL PARK

Replica of World's First
Oil Well at Original Site

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THE PENNSYLVANIA HISTORICAL
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The petroleum industry was born at Drake Well Park in 1859 on the *Pennsylvania Trail of History* at Titusville. Today a full-size and operative reproduction of Edwin L. Drake's oil well, derrick, and well house stand just where they stood 100 years ago.

The Drake Well Park nestles in a strikingly beautiful setting between the hills which enclose fabled Oil Creek, a scene of the great oil rush of the 1860's in northwestern Pennsylvania. The Drake Well Museum here, with its many exhibits, dramatizes the history and excitement of the boom days on Pennsylvania's own "Wild West" frontier. The visitor will find this a tremendously exciting and stimulating stop in what remains Pennsylvania's oil country.

The oil boom brought thousands to this part of Pennsylvania, where for the first time oil was extracted in quantity from nature's vast reservoirs. Some who came got rich, but most derived little or nothing from it. The colorful characters, however, have been immortalized in the enthralling accounts, often retold, of those days.

Replica of Drake's Well House and Derrick

PITHOLE

Pithole City, a short-lived oil boom town with 10,000 or more inhabitants at its pinnacle, can be seen once again in a series of streets, cellar holes, and guide markers on a hillside ten miles southeast of Titusville on the *Pennsylvania Trail of History*.

Pithole sprang to life overnight in the Pennsylvania oil country, six years after the oil rush had begun. On January 7, 1865, I. N. Frazier and James Faulkner drilled the famous Frazier well on the Thomas Holmden farm on Pithole Creek, a well which became, in time, the most productive in the oil country. Soon another productive well, the Homestead, began producing.

Excitement ran high everywhere in the oil country, for here was a new oil field, entirely unforeseen, several miles into the wilderness from Oil Creek, and it looked most promising. People flocked in on foot, horseback, in stages and in wagons. The Civil War had just ended, and many men had just been released to find employment in civilian life.

Pithole in Its Heyday

In May, 1865, 500 building lots and 22 streets were laid out on the slopes above Pithole Creek. The principal streets of Pithole borough were Holmden, running north and south, and First, which ran east and west and intersected it. As more producing wells were sunk and as more people flocked in, the town began to fill up with wooden structures, many of them thrown up in fewer than five days. While it prospered, the town had two banks, two telegraph offices, a daily newspaper, a water works, fire company, two church buildings, many boarding houses, grocery stores, hardware stores, machine shops, brothels, and saloons. There were many hotels, and several, the Morey, Chase, Bonta, and Danforth, were large, elegant, and comfortable. The Chase House was generally regarded as the best. It could accommodate 200 guests and 100 in the dining room.

Holmden Street Today

Historically, Pithole's greatest claim to fame is the oil pipeline, the first of its kind, which Samuel Van Syckel built five and a half miles to the closest railroad. Teamsters had been hauling oil by wagons for three dollars a barrel, but Van Syckel's pipeline carried the oil for one dollar a barrel. The trench, where the pipeline once was laid, may be followed over most of its route today.

The decline and eventual end for Pithole came about almost as fast as its spectacular rise. Trouble appeared as early as August of 1865 when the Homestead well, a big producer, suddenly stopped flowing and had to be pumped. The first of a long series of disastrous fires which swept through the oil fields during the next months and gutted many of the town's buildings occurred that same month. In November the fabulous Frazier well, the first, played out. In January of 1866 production declined sharply. And so it went. Operators, speculators, businessmen, and others began to depart, and by the end of the year the great delusion had been lived out. By 1870 only a handful of people remained.

Interest in the site was renewed in 1955 by James B. Stevenson, publisher of the Titusville *Herald,* and a member of and later chairman of the Pennsylvania Historical and Museum Commission. He cleared the site, which had been overgrown, and set up the guideposts which describe most graphically for the visitor the various features of the town. The site is administered now by the Commission.

The Museum

of William A. "Uncle Billy" Smith, a blacksmith, began drilling, a method learned from operators of salt wells. Then water began collapsing the sides of the drill holes. Drake solved this problem by driving sections of cast-iron pipe thirty-two feet to bedrock. With this done, drilling was begun at that depth about the middle of August, 1859.

On Sunday afternoon, August 28, "Uncle Billy" went out to the well, peered down the pipe into the ground, and saw oil floating only a few feet below the derrick floor. Soon a scarred countryside was covered by hastily built derricks, shacks, and tanks. The fever spread quickly.

A revolution that was to affect an entire way of life had begun. Not only had a cheap illuminant been found, a superior lubricant was now available to grease the tremendous industrial expansion in America during the years after the Civil War.

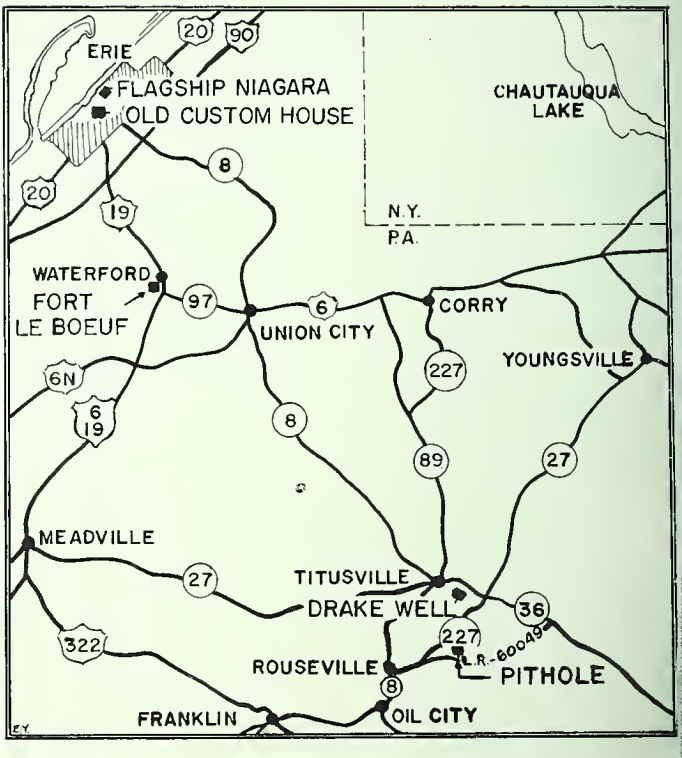
The Indians and early settlers knew about oil along Oil Creek and at other places in Western Pennsylvania, West Virginia, Ohio, and Kentucky. More often than not oil constituted a nuisance. Sometimes, however, it was skimmed off the water on which it was found to be floating and used for medicinal purposes.

During the 1840's the increasingly high cost of whale oil (whalers were rapidly depleting the whale population) and the already considerable expense of procuring candles raised questions as to the feasibility of using other fuels for lighting. Petroleum had been found unsatisfactory due to its odor and the smoke it produced. Samuel Kier, of Pittsburgh, in the early '50's, produced a fairly successful illuminant by distilling petroleum.

With the assurances of scientists at Dartmouth and Yale colleges that a highly satisfactory illuminant could be distilled from the oil of northwestern Pennsylvania, investors in New York and in New Haven, Connecticut, organized to drill for oil. Having gained control of the venture, James H. Townsend, a New Haven banker, dispatched Edwin L. Drake, an idled train conductor and former clerk, to Titusville, Pennsylvania, to bring up the oil. This was the spring of 1858.

Drake first tried to excavate for oil. In 1859 he returned to Titusville and with the assistance

Oil Field, 1860's



Visiting Hours

DAYLIGHT SAVING TIME: 8:30 A.M. to 5:00 P.M. weekdays; 1:00 to 5:00 P.M. Sunday.

WINTER: 9:00 A.M. to 4:30 P.M. weekdays; 1:00 to 4:30 P.M. Sunday.

Hours subject to change.

Telephone: Titusville, Code 814, 823-2521